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Honda Bill a Hope for WWII Prisoners

POWs redress enslavement by Japanese firms

By Ji Hyun Lim

Last week, House members introduced legislation that, they say, would set the record straight on American POWs forced into slave labor in Japan during World War II. Co-authored by Rep. Mike Honda, D-Calif., the bill would allow POWs to sue private companies in U.S. courts. Thus far, the U.S. State Department has said the 1951 peace treaty between the United States and Japan prohibits such lawsuits.

Honda said "deeply personal" reasons moved him to become involved in this case. His family was sent to an internment camp during World War II, freed only when his father volunteered to serve in military intelligence.

"It was once taboo in my community to discuss the internment," Honda said, "but the redress movement put a stop to that."

The POWs' lawsuits are another form of redress, Honda said.

"It's about reconciliation," he added. "This is not about bashing another country, another group of people."

Lester Tenney of La Jolla, Calif. is among the estimated 3,000 surviving POWs. He was forced to work for Mitsui mines after being ordered to surrender at Bataan on April 9, 1942. Some 76,000 American and Filipino prisoners of war were bound, beaten or killed by their Japanese captors; only 56,000 prisoners reached camp alive. Thousands later died from malnutrition and disease.

"It was a march into our first prison camp without food or water, with great brutality along the way," Tenney said.

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Tenney was shipped to Japan on a Japanese freighter and worked in Omuta, Japan in a coal mine in Mitsui. He shoveled coal for 2 1/2 years. When the Japanese brought the POWs in, they re-opened the mine despite safety hazards that closed the mine in the first place.

"We went into this coal mine that was half a mile down underneath the surface, and we worked there 12 hours a day," Tenney recounted. "The Japanese civilians that were working in the mine would beat us every time the Americans won another battle."

The soldiers were fed only rice. Beatings were frequent and severe, he said. Tenney, who during that time broke his left shoulder, left hand and left foot, said that the soldiers received little medical treatment. Amputations from their injuries were common.

"You never recover from it," Tenney said. "They broke my nose, knocked my teeth out, hit me in the face with a shovel, and they broke my shoulder with a pick ax."

The bill, entitled "Justice for the United States Prisoners of War Act of 2001," states that Japanese corporations have violated international law by failing to protect prisoners, refusing to pay wages for labor, and allowing and promoting torture and mistreatment of prisoners of war.

Recently, Japanese companies have settled war claims with Chinese nationals. Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., co-author of the bill, said, "American former prisoners of war are being denied a fair hearing. Our legislation is designed to correct this shameful inequity."

If the bill is passed, it would free the Department of State and would direct courts to allow slave labor suits against Japan to go forward, Ernest Baynard, Honda's spokesman, said.

"[Mike Honda] believes that the healing process for the Japanese Americans here and Americans during World War II won't begin unless there's reconciliation," Baynard said. "It will only come if these grievances are aired and justice is obtained."

Baynard contends that the bill has strong support from both parties, including Minority Whip David E. Bonior, D-Mich., and Majority Whip Tom Delay, R-Texas.

Ultimately, the bill is meant to allow the POWs to take Japanese Corporations to court to gain apology and reparation for past damages.

"It's probably the most important bill we've seen. POW history is being made with this bill because it is the most important piece of legislation ever designed to benefit the victims of the barbaric and inhumane treatment perpetrated against the American citizens

during World War II,” Tenney said.

He added: “I would like them to apologize to me. I would like to have them say to me: ‘We are sorry, sincerely sorry for what we did to you, how we deprived you of so much life.’ ”

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